Joint Fires Evolution

Major Eric P. Braganca, U.S. Air Force
Special Operations Command, Fires and Operations Observer-Trainer
Joint Forces Command, Norfolk, Virginia

ONE HISTORIC GRIEVANCE against special operations forces (SOF) has been that they do not integrate with other warfighting components, or as some might say, they "don't play well with others." Special operations forces frequently view themselves as strategic forces with missions directly supporting joint force commanders. SOF commanders recently realized, however, that special operations (SO) can and should also support land, air, and sea components' operations just as those components support SOF and each other. This shift in emphasis, largely based on experiences, good and bad, during Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, has led to dramatic improvements in SOF joint fires integration.

Special operations forces made great progress in integrating joint fires by borrowing ideas and creating unique approaches in three distinct battlespaces (in the north, west, and south) during Operation Iraqi Freedom. The creation of SOF joint fires elements (JFEs) and the use of the air component's joint air coordination elements (JACEs) cemented these successes and should be the model for future joint operations.

Before Operation Enduring Freedom, SOF headquarters worldwide knew SOF needed to integrate with the joint fires system. Joint publications for special operations describe how SOF headquarters should include joint fires expertise in both mission planning and execution.[1] However, even during the intensive planning after 11 September 2001, leaders at SOF headquarters were reluctant to seek outside joint fires assistance. Not understanding what they were missing and preferring to keep special operations small and light, SOF commanders resisted outside help at the tactical and operational levels, deployed SOF teams without terminal attack controllers, and did not seek qualified operational planners for their staffs.

But SOF leaders conducted frank battlefield assessments, realized their errors, and took steps to immediately improve operations. They and the air component built small but effective teams to integrate operations. The fusion of air support and SOF became the initial model for special operations during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

SOF solved integration challenges with innovative solutions tailored for battlespaces and missions. For many, the war in Iraq was a single, unified effort—but not for SOF fighting on three fronts with different objectives and requirements.

In northern Iraq, SOF units were the supported forces, whose mission was to prevent Iraqi units from reinforcing Baghdad. In western Iraq, SOF supported the air component to prevent SCUD launches. In the south, special forces supported coalition land forces in their drive to Baghdad. Performing supporting and supported roles required new approaches to joint fires integration that should serve as models for the future.

The challenge now is to institutionalize these successes. In Afghanistan and Iraq, SOF fought under the same geographic combatant command—Central Command—with the same air, land, naval, and SO components' headquarters. Other theaters have heard of SOF successes, but to adapt the lessons learned to future operations, commanders need detailed explanations of what occurred. They need to know why and how SOF improved.

U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM) will receive more personnel as SOF units play new roles in the war on terrorism. Replicating SOF's joint fires successes, such as the new close relationship between SOF and the conventional air component, will yield good long-term results. SOCOM and the Air Force should create a habitual relationship between their subordinate commands to prepare more agile responses during the next crisis.

Before Iraq

For over 10 years, joint doctrine for special operations has recommended the use of fire support elements (FSEs) in a joint special operations task force (JSOTF) staff. The 1993 edition of Joint Publication (JP) 3-05.1, *Joint Tactics, Techniques and Procedures for JSOTFs,* depicts an FSE in the operations section but lists no FSE duties or responsibilities.[2]

By 1998, doctrine began to integrate joint fires. Joint Publication 3-09, *Doctrine for Joint Fire Support,* contains a figure of theater air-ground system coordinating links that depicts this integration as well as the causes of some problems Special Forces faced in Afghanistan.[3] In this article, the figure shows links between each armed service that connect service components to leverage their fires. The Army has an extensive system that marries its organic fires (artillery, missiles, and helicopters) with Air Force close air support (CAS) and interdiction using tactical air control parties attached to Army units down to the battalion level. The Marine Corps has a similar arrangement that connects its air and ground fires. The Navy links its strike aviation and missiles with the other services.

Each path flows through the air component's joint air operations center to ensure the air portions of the campaign are synchronized. The circle at the upper right in the figure highlights the SO component. Special operations forces connect to no one but each other, reinforcing the view that Special Forces fight their own wars.

In 2001, some commanders at SOF headquarters realized they lacked operational fires expertise during joint exercises and began to correct this deficiency. They had not had enough time to do so, however, when the events of 11 September 2001 occurred. The updated JP 3-05.1, *Special Operations Task Force,* prescribes several JSOTF FSE functions (coordinating boundaries; representing SOF activities to other commands and agencies; preventing fratricide; and so on).[4] The joint publication recommends a fire support annex to operations orders and standard operating procedures (SOPs), but this doctrine was still being written when Operation Enduring Freedom began; SOF had to solve joint fires problems in combat and learned valuable lessons from the experience.

Task Force Dagger, the initial JSOTF formed around the core of an Army Special Forces group headquarters in Afghanistan, experienced problems using joint fires at the tactical and operational levels. Task Force Dagger's first few teams deployed without terminal attack controllers—Air Force troops trained and certified to control CAS.

During the first few days of combat, unsuccessful CAS revealed how important it is to have experts on the ground immediately. Task Force Dagger's commander quickly deployed trained ground controllers who had an immediate, positive effect on the campaign.[5] Within days, every special forces team had a qualified terminal attack controller, but this posed new problems.[6] These air-savvy ground controllers sent air support requests back to the JSOTF, but no one in JSOTF headquarters knew how to include joint fires in campaign planning; to collate and submit subordinate fire requests; or to deconflict other components' operations.[7]

No one in JSOTF headquarters knew how to include joint fires in campaign planning . . . , [so the ACC] deployed a small element of the same type the Air Force uses to support conventional Army maneuvers. . . . The teams on the ground felt the change as soon as CAS became readily available [and] gave SOF what they lacked organically—the ability to plan and coordinate joint fires.

Special operations forces had a liaison element at the air component, so the JSOTF came to rely almost exclusively on this liaison cell for deconfliction and integration—with limited success because the liaison cell was in Saudi Arabia. The JSOTF had no resident joint fires expertise in Afghanistan.

Fortunately, the air component commander (ACC) understood the problem and deployed a small element of the same type the Air Force uses to support conventional Army maneuvers. As with the controllers on the battlefield, this addition was a dramatic improvement and resulted in immediate improvements in coordinating and integrating with the air component. The teams on the ground felt the change as soon as CAS became readily available. The Air Force element, the JACE, gave SOF what they lacked organically—the ability to plan and coordinate joint fires.

Operation Iraqi Freedom

While operations were still underway in Afghanistan, Central Command and its components focused on planning Operation Iraqi Freedom. Using the JACE to coordinate fires, the Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command (CFSOCC) continued the fight on the three fronts.[8] In the north, SOF attempted to prevent Iraqi units from joining in the defense of Baghdad. In the west, SOF supported the ACC's mission to prevent Iraq from using theater ballistic missiles (SCUDs and other long-range missiles). In the south, SOF supported the land component command mission to eliminate special Iraqi forces such as the Republican Guard. Each SOF

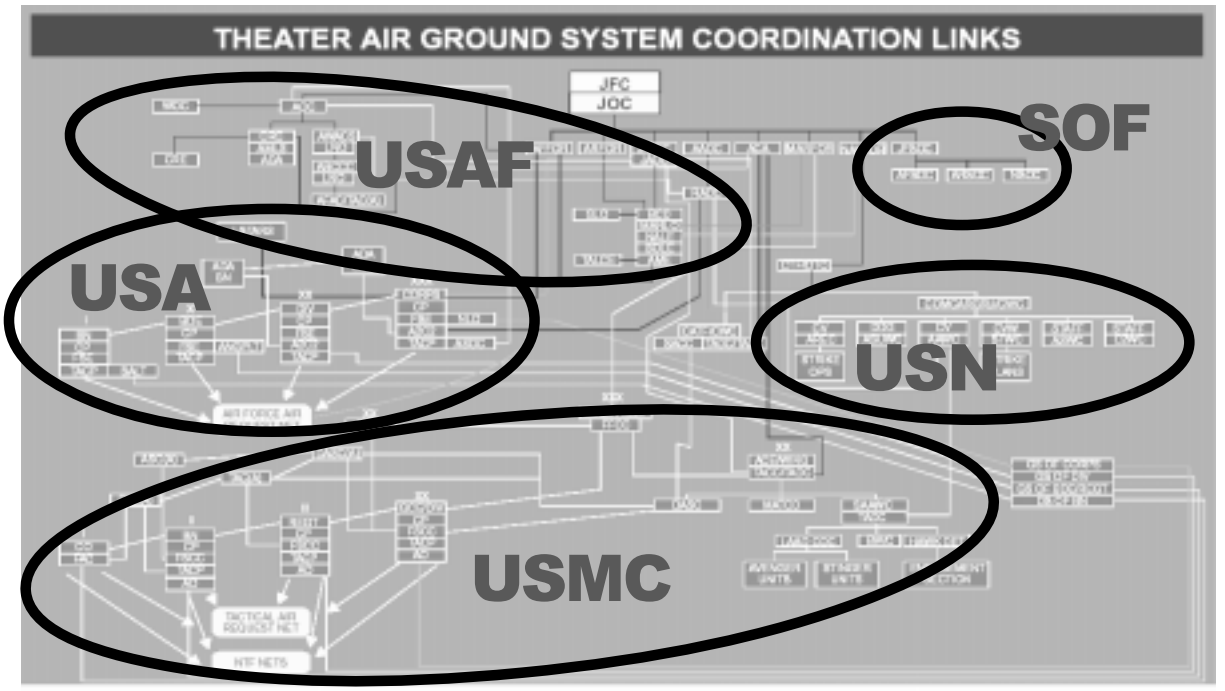

Figure III-3. Theater Air Ground System Coordination Links

Task Force Dagger's first few teams deployed without terminal attack controllers—Air Force troops trained and certified to control CAS. During the first few days of combat, unsuccessful CAS revealed how important it is to have experts on the ground immediately. Task Force Dagger's commander quickly deployed trained ground controllers. . . .

fight required unique approaches to joint fires integration. The CFSOCC, the Combined Forces Air Component Command, and the Combined Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC) developed tailored packages for each front.

In the north, where the SOF commander was the supported commander, the air component deployed a JACE to the JSOTF (the subordinate SOF headquarters to CFSOCC), and the JSOTF developed its own robust JFE. The two organizations worked closely but maintained separate identities. The JACE focused on air operations while the JFE focused on all lethal and nonlethal effects. In the west, where SOF supported the air component in the counter-SCUD mission, the JFE and the JACE became a single organization because SOF and the air component had the same mission. In the south, SOF used a completely different structure to integrate with the land component.

Integrating into the land battle presented challenges. Two organizations subordinate to the CFLCC had different organizations for fires. The First Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF) and the Army's V Corps used different processes for the deep operations that SOF supported. Rather than creating a one-size-fits-all solution, Special Operations Command Central and its subordinate commands created a flexible system of command and control (C2) and liaison elements to ensure that SOF supported the Third Army and its subordinate commands.

The CFSOCC and CFLCC exchanged liaison officers to create a conduit for information. By mutual agreement, CFSOCC's subordinate commands sent C2 elements to V Corps and I MEF. Each special operations command and control element (SOCCE) took tactical control of teams operating in the ground forces' areas to ensure that all SOF operations were fully integrated.[9] V Corps' SOCCE deployed small ad hoc liaison elements to the subordinate divisions to keep division commanders, who the SOCCE also directly supported, informed on SOF operations.

This flexible integration worked effectively. SOF supported the CFLCC in front of and behind the nonlinear operation. Using this scheme, SOF conducted reconnaissance on critical lines of communication in advance of the Army's 3d Infantry Division en route to Baghdad and supported I MEF with AC-130 gunships in rear areas, helping to eliminate the Fedayeen.

SOF solved integration challenges with innovative solutions tailored for various battlespaces and missions. For many, the war in Iraq was a single,

unified effort—but not for SOF fighting on three fronts with different objectives and requirements. Altogether, SOF nominated over 5,200 targets as part of this process.[10] In preparation for the arrival of conventional forces, SOF captured oil fields, which held one-third of the Iraqi oil reserves; helped prevent ballistic missile launches; and captured a key southern oil distribution point. In large part, these successes were the result of the agile thinking of special forces and air and land component joint fires architects who designed the system.

SOF Joint Fires Future

SOF learned painful but beneficial lessons, and the challenge now is to incorporate them. By improving joint fires expertise in SOF headquarters, formalizing the SOCOM-Air Force link, and updating joint doctrine, lessons learned will endure. They will become a part of routine training to ensure the long-term survival of methods that brought great success during Operation Iraqi Freedom—and without repeating the lengthy learning process.

Currently, no theater SOF command has a standing JFE with which to provide resident expertise during planning and exercise development; to ensure that theater SOF commands establish and maintain links to sister components; and to rehearse processes during staff and field training exercises. A standing JFE would not need to be as large as JFEs were in Iraq (having as many as 24 people in one command).[11] With only four experts in joint fires (Army fire support, Marine Corps artillery, Air Force CAS, and Navy interdiction), each SOF command would have a core staff to develop SOPs, incorporate joint fires into deliberate planning (operational and concept plans), and include these concepts in routine exercises.

With more manpower to fight the global war on terrorism, SOCOM can afford to move a handful of personnel to theater JFEs to improve joint fires integration and significantly aid the war against terrorism. The Marine Corps, working with SOCOM to integrate some Marine forces into SOF, should see this as an excellent opportunity to lend its great joint fires expertise to SOF headquarters staffs.

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For many years, SOF successfully used Air Force terminal attack controllers to augment special operations, even using some who were permanently attached as trainers. The JACEs' direct-support relationship to the JSOTF headquarters is new and noteworthy. SOCOM and the Air Force should formalize this arrangement for routine tactical and operational training as well as during contingencies. A formal SOCOM and Air Force agreement linking specific SO headquarters with specific Air Force tactical air control units, possibly geographically oriented, would allow SOCOM and the Air Force to develop a habitual working relationship so they could agree on tactics, techniques, and procedures before a contingency erupts.[12] Without a formal agreement, SOCOM might have to relearn recent successes with the same risk to the mission as in the past.

Proven methods for successful joint fires integration should now become part of joint fire support doctrine and joint SO doctrine.[13] These are the first places SOF should incorporate the new methods. Eventually, however, the Army should also revise other joint doctrine, such as joint targeting, joint TTP for CAS, and JSOTF operations. The other services should also consider modifying their doctrine to reflect their contributions to this collaborative effort. By creating new standing JFEs, formalizing SOCOM-Air Force links, and aggressively changing its doctrine, SOF can institutionalize its successes and improve future operations. ***MR***

NOTES

1. Joint Publications (JP) for special operations include JP 3.05, *Special Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], March 2003); JP 3-05.1, *Special Operations Task Force* (Washington, DC: GPO, July 2001); and JP 3-05.2, *Special Operations Mission and Plan* (Washington, DC: GPO, July 2002).
2. JP 3-05.1, *Joint Tactics, Techniques and Procedures for JSOTFs* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1993).
3. JP 3-09, *Doctrine for Joint Fire Support* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1998).
4. JP 3-05.1, July 2001.
5. U.S. forces employed terminal attack controllers immediately after a failed attempt to secure the town of Mazar-E-Sharif in northern Afghanistan. The resulting re-attack proved devastatingly successful because the placement of bombs was accurate and well coordinated. SOF and Northern Alliance troops repeated this positive result when they swept down to Khandahar in the next few weeks.
6. Task Force Dagger used Air Force special tactics combat controllers and terminal attack controllers. While significant differences exist in these career fields, they train and certify identically for CAS.
7. These issues were not related to fratricide incidents; those were tactical errors.
8. The Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command (CFSOCC) was formed around the core of Special Operations Command Central (SOCCENT), a subordinate unified command of the Central Command (CENTCOM) with operational control of SOF. The Combined Forces Air Component Command (CFACC) was the single airpower component formed around the core of the Ninth Air Force. The CENTCOM commander was known as the combined forces commander. The Combined Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC) was the single land component formed around the core of Third Army, integrating the Army's V Corps and the Marine Corps' I MEF. SOCCENT became the CFSOCC. The Ninth Air Force became the CFACC, and Third Army became the CFLCC.
9. Naval Special Operations used a Naval Special Warfare Task Unit as its C2 element. Although the names are different, the roles and functions were similar.
10. U.S. Central Air Forces (CENTAF), "Operation IRAQI FREEDOM—By the Numbers," Assessment and Analysis Division (Shaw AFB, SC: CENTAF, 30 April 2003).
11. LTC Gregory Fenton, Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-North Joint Fires Element Director, interview with the author, 16 October 2003.
12. While existing tactical air control party units are already assigned to specific Army units, it is possible to cross-align these units. For instance, one might align the SOF headquarters in Korea with an Air Force unit that routinely supports an Army division not slated to go to Korea, such as one located in Germany. While this increases the burden on these units, such change is required to make SOF and the Air Force more agile for future contingencies.
13. JP 3-09, *Doctrine for Joint Fires Support* (Washington, DC: GPO, 12 May 1998) is due for review. See also JP 3-05, *Doctrine for Joint Special Operations* (Washington, DC: GPO, 7 April 1998).